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ABSTRACT

Noting that telecommunications technology is making it possible to search library catalogs around the nation and the world via a modem and a personal computer, this paper highlights some of the reasons why a researcher would wish to search library catalogs through the Internet, which is a network of networks with connections to nearly 1,000 regional, government, and campus networks. The paper also discusses some of the problems that may be encountered by researchers who wish to use Internet to retrieve information, and describes efforts being made in the Northwestern University library's reference department to improve the existing documentation on Internet for its users. Outreach programs designed to increase faculty members' awareness and use of remote catalogs are also described. The paper concludes with a discussion of efforts being made on a national scale to extend the outreach of the Internet, which will promote the provision of information resources on existing networks and on proposed interconnected networks. (MAB)

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Casting a New Net: Searching Library Catalogs via the Internet

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This paper is based largely on a previously published paper, of the same title by Marilee Birchfield, Norman Weston, and Betsy Baker in Northwestern University Computing and Networking 5(3): 36-39, Fall 1990.

One reason for my interest in this topic is that it is a natural extension of developments in our field. It would be an understatement to say that two strong concerns of librarians in the recent past have been both online public catalogs and telecommunications. Just when you think all that could be said about online catalogs has been said, the Internet comes along to offer a new twist. As a reference and bibliographic instruction librarian, understanding and communicating strategies for catalog access is an important and daily component of my job.

The same can be said for telecommunications. A typical day for me begins at a terminal with my electronic mail, reading and sending messages to colleagues on campus and around the country, as well as being a subscriber to a new bibliographic instruction list service. As a librarian new to Illinois I have been an amazed and grateful user of ILLINET Online. When we hope for a new staff pc in the Reference Department we wouldn't dream of not requesting a modem at the same time. All this is given as evidence that telecommunications are a growing part of all our professional lives.

Thanks to the Internet connections now in place, researchers across the country have the technical capacity to access library catalogs at other universities directly through their campus computer networks. Technology is bringing us closer to the ideal of the "library without walls." It is now possible not only to search local catalogs via a modem and personal computer, but to extend searching electronically and economically to library collections around the country and the world. In this presentation I will highlight some of the reasons a researcher may wish to search library catalogs through the Internet, provide some directions and support for encouraging researchers to take the first steps to being a library user on the Internet, and describe efforts being made in Northwestern University Library's Reference Department to increase awareness and use of remote catalogs.

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WHAT IS THE INTERNET?

The Internet is a network of networks with connections to nearly 1,000 regional, government, and campus networks. It is a somewhat nebulous network. NSFNET serves as the backbone and allows for a wide variety of services including electronic mail, file transfer, and remote logins. One-third of the activity on NSFNET is devoted to networked mail applications, roughly another third for file transfer, 20% for interactive applications which would include searching library catalogs, and the remaining uses are directory look-ups and other services. Just a short while ago there were a mere handful of university library catalogs available over the Internet. Today, the number of Internet-accessible catalogs and databases exceeds 40, and is growing. Recent additions include the University of Konstanz in Germany, the Australian National University, Vanderbilt University, Auburn University, Case Western Reserve University, and the University of Chicago.

WHY SEARCH LIBRARY CATALOGS ON THE INTERNET?

The value of searching catalogs through the Internet is the "intellectual access" gained to an expanded universe of sources beyond those available at a local institution. However, finding sources you may wish to borrow is only one of many reasons a researcher might search other libraries' catalogs. There are practical reasons:

Internet access allows you to maximize your time by searching a remote location before you leave your own campus. Scholars may be going to a conference in another city or have a grant to conduct research at other libraries. One person commented on the PACS-L list service that he spent 30 to 45 percent of his time in other libraries using the catalog. Searching the local catalog, as opposed to a utility such as OCLC, also saves time by combining the steps of identification and location--a crucial step, especially in a decentralized library system.

Convenience has always been an argument for remote access. Perhaps you are working late at home one evening and need to find the birth and death dates of an author, or you may be in the final stages of manuscript preparation and realize that you are missing some crucial bibliographic references. Answers to questions such as these can often be provided at odd hours using the Internet to search another library's catalog--a library across the country which is still open or a library with later hours for remote access.

Intellectual curiosity is another reason people search other systems. Aside from seeking answers to questions or pursuing

specific references, you may wish to simply "browse" a number of catalogs. Using Internet, it is almost possible to wander up one side of a library and down another, without ever leaving your desk. Such an exercise will do more than satisfy curiosity; it will also provide an opportunity to experiment with different searching capabilities, such as keyword or Boolean, or to see how instruction and help screens are offered by different systems. Some library users have lamented the disappearance of the card catalog because of its browsability, but online catalogs allow remote users to delve into the stacks of libraries they may never visit. All of this makes traveling to libraries through the Internet connection a regular activity for many researchers.

CATALOG ACCESS THROUGH THE INTERNET: BEYOND AN ADDRESS

To use the library catalogs, a researcher needs to know more than the Internet address. The technological capability of accessing library catalogs is, in most instances, ahead of the support structure for network users. A major stumbling block for many users is the number of conflicting protocols, commands, and procedures which must be understood if searching is to be done successfully. This problem can be compounded by a lack of print or online documentation. Log-on and log-off procedures may also not be apparent. Various kinds of software and terminals may require different key strokes to access the database. Search capabilities and database structure also vary dramatically among online library catalogs.

There is a directory of Internet addresses and log-on procedures of some library catalogs available on BITNET. To receive the directory, send the following message via BITNET: "GET INTERNET LIBRARY" to LISTSERV@UNMVM. A contact person for each system is also listed and this can be quite useful information to know.

To help us better serve our patrons, CIC libraries have gathered documentation on using each other's catalogs. We have made this documentation available within the Reference Department for patrons using a public pc for dial-up access to local area catalogs. The university community was made aware of the collection of instructional materials through a recent article in our campus computing newsletter and copies of the information about a particular catalog from this set may also be requested from the Reference Department, and I can report they have asked for it. The requests have been gratifying, evidence that some people are interested, rather than a drain on our photocopying resources. It is a testament to the type of user who currently searches via the Internet that they can do so much with such relatively spotty documentation.

At Northwestern I co-authored the article on Internet access to library catalogs which appeared in our campus computing newsletter. Articles on library computing have been a standard feature of the newsletter. Past subjects have included downloading from the online catalog, catalog search enhancements, and CD-ROM technology. I think it is an important statement that the information about Internet access to other library catalogs came from the library rather than the computing center. It is important enough to me that while as Instructional Services Librarian I was in the midst of planning for fall quarter activities I made learning more about Internet access and writing the article a priority. While I do not pretend to be able to diagnose the technical problems an Internet searcher may run into, as a librarian I do have an expertise to contribute. In the article we offered basic advice for approaching any catalog, advice which is often second-nature to librarians but which may be a helpful reminder for many of our users.

First we recommended that the researcher approach searching the Internet by asking the following questions: What are the dates of coverage for the materials in the catalog (for example, most items in Northwestern's LUIS were acquired after 1970)? Are all formats of material--books, journals, videos, sound recordings, etc.-- in the library included? Are other affiliated collections included? For example, the catalog of The Ohio State University Libraries contains records from the Center for Research Libraries, the State Library of Ohio, the Ohio Historical Society and ERIC. These are the same questions we hope our Northwestern students and faculty ask as they approach LUIS. By keeping these questions in mind, although answers may not be obvious, researchers will be making more informed use of the catalog and will be better able to fully exploit searching opportunities. NUL's online catalog has considerable instruction built into the system. By reading the introductory and help screens the scope and content of the database becomes clear. Other catalogs may offer limited instruction.

EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

Perhaps the best advice we can offer to our users is for them to approach searching library catalogs on the Internet critically and creatively. A little patience will also help. A lack of documentation and non-standardized protocols can lead to frustration, but sometimes the difficulties may lie not with you, the searcher, but with the system you are trying to access. The problem may be as basic as computer down time or other distant computer irregularities. Of course this may be difficult for you to determine. We alerted our readers to other limitations to remote access which exist.

* Some systems support only certain types of terminals. Access from a wide variety of terminals may just not be possible.

* Some library catalogs consist of multiple databases. Copyright and licensing agreements may restrict access to particular portions of the system to authorized users.

* Catalogs provide intellectual access to bibliographic citations. Access to a physical item is not guaranteed. Not all the materials will be obtainable through interlibrary loan.

MAKING MORE CONNECTIONS

As I have previously mentioned, discussing the use of remote catalogs gives one an avenue for general instruction in how to approach a database and cognitive search techniques. The searching of remote catalogs, from the Reference Department's public pc and via the Internet, was highlighted in a recent program Northwestern held for new faculty. Faculty outreach continues beyond such specialized programs. Within the Reference Department faculty department liaison responsibilities have been assigned to librarians. Individual librarians will be following-up at the department level and such contact will enable us to learn more about who is "connected" on campus and how they use libraries.

On the national scene several projects are underway to extend the reach of the Internet. The newly formed Coalition for Networked Information, founded by the Association of Research Libraries, CAUSE, an association for the management of information technology in higher education, and EDUCOM, a long-standing consortium of colleges, universities, and other institutions, will promote the provision of information resources on existing networks and on proposed interconnected networks. Earlier this week they meet in Washington, DC and one of our assistant directors was there to represent academic libraries. Key concerns of this group are to develop a set of initiatives to address the public policy issues and to identify and assign priorities for the provision of networked information resources. Academic libraries share a long tradition of exchanging data and promoting information resources. The developments with the Internet represent one more means to link researchers with the information they need.

Learning about and searching library catalogs via the Internet has been of value and benefit to me personally. As we travel together, librarians and researchers, we will all learn more about how these exciting new resources can fit into our expectations of library service, but more importantly how they fit into our users' expectations.